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THE LAST REFUGE OF INNOCENCE

Wyn Wachhorst

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The images are indelible: eighty-five elephants bathing in the river in late afternoon light, a stone's throw from our launch; a pride of lions at the edge of a lake, devouring their kill in the sunset; a giraffe poised in a meadow on the end of a rainbow; or the earth-shaking thunder of Victoria Falls, plunging at three million gallons a second, as though some cosmic abyss had opened to swallow all the waters of the world. The experience of Africa - from the regal lion, the rare rhinoceros, and the cantankerous cape buffalo, to the ill-tempered hippo, the elusive leopard, or the flight of a thousand flamingos - is essential to any sojourn on this planet. But the lure of the Dark Continent lies deeper than the images.

In the crisp chill of predawn, as our open vehicle crawled over rutted roads toward the first glow of day, a timeless aura lay over the land, stretching out before us to a horizon dotted with umbrella trees-bare limbed under brush-stroke foliage, leaning and reaching in the dawn light. I imagined the same fresh morning four million years before, when the Olduvai humans stood in their pristine vitality on the shore of this ancient lake; and the hills rose up behind, rolling dark and hulking, like a herd of great beasts. Africa! The word alone recalls some primal Source, some pulsating center deep in the racial memory, the mystery of origins, the Mother of humans. Like the sea itself, this vast ocean of land, with its dark jungles and majestic mountains, is the primordial Home, the mythic Eden from which men spread over the planet like terrestrial astronauts, surviving ever more harsh and artificial environments.

We are drawn back. Europeans go back; Americans go back; people from Los Angeles go back, fleeing the quiet desperation of tire marts and daytime TV, drawn by some mythic remembrance of strength and sunlight, of fresh mornings when we walked with the beasts, woven gracefully into their world.

We return to Africa to reencounter the four million years of history that a mere four millennia could never efface. Like the hero in *Heart of Darkness*, we are drawn to the Dark Continent of our inner Selves - the dark forest of the soul where the modern ego lies encamped in a tiny clearing. And we project our half-remembered wholeness onto that sun-drenched land of major chords and primary colors, of smiling primitives and beautifully painted creatures. For we are the Shadow People, fallen from grace, cast from the inner Eden to a wilderness of externals.

We return to the Dark Continent and lie awake in our tents, projecting our monsters into the African night - startled from sleep by the sloshing of elephants along the lakeshore, or the hollow brays of hippos, afloat somewhere down the dark river. But these are the bogies of bad movies, the misplaced specters of a surreal civilization. The innocent creatures themselves, who once roamed the continent at will, now wander the Serengeti like artifacts of evolution, the last remnants of an unfragmented world.

One feels that this is the last refuge of innocence, that the last lions may soon

lie in that sunset by the water's edge. Along the banks of the Chobe River, the elephants gather in the dusk; their great dark shapes endure as monuments to the vast ocean of life that once covered this continent. And the giraffe whose head soared above the rainbow into the gray mist, watching us with long-lashed liquid eyes, spoke the sad hope of all surviving species. Only the ringing of insects under the red sky seems eternal, like some residual trace of the lost tribal rhythms - the melodious chants of Zulu and Maasai that once rose up like voices from the earth, echoing off the far hills in the heat of the day, to fade over the long grass, leaving the land in desolate silence.

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